

TORREYA

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INDIANS AND CONSERVATION OF NATIVE LIFE

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With regard to the indigenous fauna and flora the attitude of mind respectively of white people and of Indians seems to be fundamentally different. The attitude of white people generally seems to be that the extinction of a species of plant or animal is a matter of indifference except for the consideration of its desirability for utility or for pleasure. The thought of preservation of the balance of nature does not sway the mind of most white people. But it is the consideration which, to the Indian mind, is of prime importance.

Most white men are unable to appreciate or to comprehend the grief and pain experienced by Indians when they see the native forms of life in America ruthlessly and wantonly destroyed. It was not primarily the realization of economic loss, the loss of a valuable source of food, which caused distress to Indians when, for instance, they witnessed the destruction of wild rice fields and lotus beds, but it was the sense of a fearful void in nature ensuing upon the extinction of a given species where it had formerly flourished. They were pained to contemplate the dislocation of nature's nice balance, the destruction of world symmetry.

I have been told many times, by different persons of various different tribes, of the teaching concerning the sanctity of life which they received in their childhood. They tell me that they were taught by their parents and elders that plants and animals must not be destroyed needlessly, that wanton destruction is wicked. A precept which they frequently heard was: "Do not needlessly destroy the flowers on the prairie or in the woods. If the flowers are plucked there will be no flower babies (seeds); and if there be no flower babies then in time there will be no people of the flower nations. And if the flower nations die out of the world, then the earth will be sad. All the flower nations,

and all the different nations of living things have their own proper place in the world, and the world would be incomplete and imperfect without them."

I once asked an old Omaha what was the feeling of Indians when they saw white men wantonly slaughtering the buffalo. He dropped his head and was silent for a little while, seeming to be overcome by a feeling of sadness. When he spoke again it was in a low, sad tone, seeming filled with shame that such a thing could be done by human beings. He said: "It seemed to us a most wicked, awful thing."

Again I was talking with an old man of the Omaha nation. He, recalling the old days and comparing them with the present time, said: "When I was a youth the country was very beautiful. Along the rivers were belts of timberland, where grew cottonwoods, maples, elms, ash, hickory and walnut trees, and many other kinds. Also there were various kinds of vines and shrubs. And under these grew many good herbs and beautiful flowering plants. In both the woodland and the prairie I could see the trails of many kinds of animals and hear the cheerful songs of birds of many kinds. When I walked abroad I could see many forms of life, beautiful living creatures of many kinds which Wakanda had placed here; and these were after their manner walking, flying, leaping, running, playing all about. But now the face of all the land is changed and sad. The living creatures are gone. I see the land desolate, and I suffer an unspeakable sadness. Sometimes I wake in the night and I feel as though I should suffocate from the pressure of this awful feeling of loneliness."

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THE FLORA OF SIBERIA*

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After we left Moscow on the Transiberian Railroad, we crossed Russia by way of Vologda, Viatka and Perm, reaching the Sib-

* The identification of plants mentioned are based on my knowledge of the genera and some of the species, the notes from the literature I brought with me, and identifications kindly made for me at the Baical Station of the University of Irkutsk, by the botanists W. Jasnitsky and Nina A. Epoff.